



Good times at Camp Freedom

Boy Scouts learn leadership while having fun and adventures

Hundreds of boys throughout Europe are converging on a wooded area about an hour north of Giessen, Germany, this summer to explore “The Final Frontier.”

U.S. Army Garrison Hessen Boy Scouts are among the more than 700 youths spending a week at a time at Camp Freedom to earn merit badges, learn about conservation and to enjoy everything from aquatics to archery, Scout crafts to rocket science.

“We’re going to see about 750 Scouts this season,” said Karen Meier, Camp Freedom director, explaining that while there will be fewer Scouts attending this year than in past years due to downsizing of U.S. Forces in Europe, the intent remains the same — to help foster character, citizenship and fitness among the youths.

“There’s magic here that happens,” said Meier, describing the many opportunities for learning, sharing experiences and growth as teams and individuals. “You see the synergy happening. They truly go away with a wonderful experience and I hope they go away more grown up.”

This year Camp Freedom’s theme, “The Final Frontier,” mirrors the space exploration drive in that Boy Scouts must be dedicated and use teamwork to achieve their goals, Meier said. A rocket launch opened the week.

“This gives these boys an outdoor experience,” said Carl Mueller, a retired warrant officer who served two tours in Vietnam and is concluding his tenure as camp ranger after 25 years of supporting Scouting in Europe. “This gives them something to do in the summer and also helps build some character and different styles of leadership.

“But the main thing is, they’re here to have fun,” said Mueller. “It gets them outdoors, away from the Xbox and gives them a chance to meet their peers from different countries and cultures. It also gives them a chance to learn such things as lifesaving skills and to earn lifeguard certification.”

“We’re having a great time,” said Sgt. Shane Tracy, scoutmaster for Hanau’s Troop 49 and assigned to the Hanau Health Clinic. “All of the Scouts are working together like a family.

“It really is like a family atmosphere. ... The boys have the opportunity to come out here and learn things such as how to camp,” he said, adding that earning merit badges and the experiences shared are the highlights of the week-long camp. “It’s proving to be a positive experience.”

“I’m working on my swimming merit badge,” said Hanau Scout Sean Boyle of Troop 49. “The pool is outstanding.”

The 12-year-old described the Scouting experience as “fun. It gives you a lot of opportunities to do things, make new friends and help out the community.”

Boyle was involved in a recycling project in Hanau last year as part of a fellow Scout’s Eagle project.

“Scouting helps teach kids how to behave, to do service projects and to be kind,” said Troop 49 patrol leader Daniel Brooking, age 14. “I’d recommend Scouting to other boys.”

Brooking, who was enjoying his second year at Camp Freedom, said he particularly appreciated the chance to be out in the country to “enjoy the view” and to play Kubb, a team skills building game introduced by Jeremy Woods, program director, at this year’s camp.

With many families separated by deployments, Camp Freedom also provides a welcome respite from daily life, said Becky Aldridge, camp business manager.

“We’re sensitive to Scouts who have a parent downrange,” she said, explaining that most of the camp staff and leaders have military experience and discuss warning signs they should be aware of among the Scouts during their training before the camp opens. “Most of these guys are military and have been exposed to what this entails.”

Providing a nurturing environment where the boys can safely explore new experiences, share emotions and grow as individuals are vital parts of the camp experience, she said.

Conservation is another important part of the camp experience, said Meier, explaining that the Boy Scouts of America stress conservation. “We choose a project on an annual basis.”

Adult volunteers are crucial to the Scouting experience, Meier added. While the goal is to turn boys into leaders, “you need the adult leadership for coaching and mentoring. We want any adults who have a passion for youth, who believe in the Boy Scout legacy. What could be more empowering than leaving a legacy ... of good values.

“Baden-Powell (the father of the Boy Scout movement) had a great phrase,” said Meier, “It’s fun with a purpose. Hopefully these Scouts leave the camp with that legacy,” she said.

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